Using Multiple Literacy Themes to Support Content-Based Learning

Katie Subra

A multiple literacy approach to ESL helps students attain a level of academic language skills whereby the student is able to use his/her literacy skills to complete realistic tasks in an authentic academic context.

From literacy to multiple literacies

The term literacy needs to be broadened and modernized in order to describe the language learning demands at a level of literacy whereby the student is able to use these skills together to complete realistic tasks in an authentic academic context. Literacy in any specific subject is the ability to not only read and understand, but also to use the information that is given. The concept of literacy as "multiple" is reflective of the impact of multiculturalism and multimedia in the use of modern Englishes. As a result of this impact, "a literate person needs to know how to cross linguistic boundaries and how to respect language and cultural diversity" (Melzer & Coxwell-Teague, 2011, p. 2).

This also implies that one can be literate in one subject and not in another and that the level of literacy can be measured on a continuum. Some instructors may find it helpful to apply Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, 1956) to these multiple literacy themes to help evaluate how literate a student is in a given subject. For example, a student may have literacy abilities that range from basic factual knowledge all the way to the more advanced abilities of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation within a specific literacy skill.

Collaborating across classrooms for authenticity and meaningful context

While the following literacy themes were designed for a college IEP curriculum, they may be adapted to other settings. This concept of building a curriculum on the foundation of multiple literacy themes is compatible with instructors aiming to provide more authentic materials in their instruction, so even if a particular literacy theme is new for the student, this will present a good challenge for them. Some things do need to be taught at a level of comprehensible input; however, "given a meaningful context—learners can comprehend the general meaning of oral or written texts that contain vocabulary and structures they have not 'mastered' " (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 191). Additionally, students can comprehend input in multiple literacy contexts.

The classroom that will be most successful in implementing curriculum and instruction focusing on multiple literacies is one where the instructor is placed in a collaborative environment where classrooms of varying levels and skills are encouraged to work together. Collaboration from other school departments and community organizations will feed the success of this classroom as well. These and many other literacy themes and ideas can be found and adapted from a textbook designed for college composition called "Everything's a Text" (Melzer & Coxwell-Teague, 2011). Some of these concepts inspired the following curricular literacy themes or units, which include: Academic, Digital, Visual, Historical, Civic, and Nutritional Literacies.

In the following, I will describe the curriculum and tasks designed for a college IEP classroom that utilize multiple literacies as its foundation. The following types of literacies are included in the description of tasks and activities: academic, digital, visual, historical, civic, and nutritional.

Academic Literacy

Academic Literacy is a logical place to begin since the tasks used in this theme will likely be used in every other literacy task to follow. With this as with other literacy themes, it may be a good idea to pre-teach some of the vocabulary that will be used to instruct and complete academic tasks as appropriate for the classroom level. Depending upon the level of collaboration in the ESL program, the tasks learned in this theme may be replicated in other skilled classrooms or during future academic classrooms. Given these variables, these example tasks may require anywhere from a couple of class periods to a couple of weeks to complete.

Reading and using graphic organizers

This task requires students to use their reading, writing, and speaking skills. Graphic organizers can be found in academic contexts relevant to the students' various disciplines, but digital resources such as the Pew Research Center website (http://www.pewresearch.org/) can help put the contextually relevant data into the students' hands. If the ESL reading level is lower, the instructor may need to collect various samples of these graphic organizers for the students to read. Students can be assigned to look for several specific examples of graphic organizers such as line graphs, bar graphs, Venn diagrams, pie charts, tables and so on. To take this task one step further, students can then conduct a classroom or campus survey and put the data into a graphic organizer. After completing all of those tasks, the students can teach each other what they have learned in either an informal group discussion or a formal presentation.

Accessing library materials

This task is fairly self-explanatory, but will require a lot of step-by-step guidance from the instructor as it requires the use of Digital Literacy and reading skills. If the school's library or even the local public library has an online catalog as well as eJournals and resources, this will require two parts: accessing digital and print materials. The instructor can create a table for the student to fill in which requires citation data including the database or catalog used, search words, titles, dates, authors, and possibly the location of the materials (Table 1). It is useful to begin with common titles, for example ESL resources, to give the students remedial practice before they begin searching for materials that are relevant to their own interests and majors.

Table 1: Digital Database Search

Database	**Search words**	**Article Title**	**Journal**	**Volume**	**Author(s)**	**PDF file? Yes/No**
Ex: Sample Database	ESL Writing Guide	Sample Title	Sample Journal	Apr2 010, Vol. 41 Issue 1	Sample Author.	No
Student's Choice	ESL Writing Skills					

Student's Choice	Major Interest					

Referencing

After completing the task of accessing library materials, the next logical task would be to require students to integrate a piece of their research into either a short writing task or a presentation. This will also require a lot of step-by-step guidance and will likely be replicated in other classrooms. For the sake of positive reinforcement, it may be useful to find out what types of research the students are going to be expected to do in their other classrooms so that they might begin doing this research immediately. The teacher will need to provide examples of proper citations in the target context.

Microteaching

Microteaching is simply the concept of having students prepare a focused lesson plan, which includes an overview of the subject and a peer activity. Microteaching works well in pairs as many students (like their teachers) may benefit from having a co-teacher to work with. This can be done with different skill subjects, such as: grammatical rules, word families, or writing styles. These subjects can be summarized by the student(s) and a guided activity created by the student(s) should follow. After the students have seen a variety of games, quizzes, and worksheets in their ESL classrooms, they will be able to generate their own with some help from the instructor. To ensure a smooth microteaching, subjects should be elected early on in the semester. Also, the presentation and activity materials should be checked by the instructor prior to the microteaching date. In a more advanced class, this style can be adapted to any presentation subject by requiring students to follow up their formal presentation of data with a peer quiz, game, or other activity.

Digital Literacy

If needed, digital literacy can be taught in a focused way; however, this is definitely the most adaptable of the literacy themes. When teaching academic literacy or civic literacy for example, students will use their digital literacy skills to create diagrams, access library materials, create digital presentation materials, and so on. The instructor may need to demonstrate these tasks throughout the entire course; however, if there are specific tools that will be used in the classroom, it can be useful to take a few class periods to practice using these. Most modern students are familiar with using Word processors, presentation tools, and blogs, but if there is a specific way that they will be using these tools, the tools need to be demonstrated. Also, consider teaching the vocabulary of digital literacy. A lot of students know how to use these tools, but are not literate when it comes to having a dialogue or following instructions for digital tasks.

Visual Literacy

Visual literacy lends itself to the largest range of skill levels since this is a skill that has been cultivated since infancy. This also leads many to think of it as an elementary skill, but on the contrary, the ability to read the scenes, pictures, advertisements, signs, colors, logos, facial

expressions, artwork, and all other visuals that fill our cultural, academic, and personal lives is an evolving skill. At any given point in the process of learning a language, one might read these visuals in a different way. Using language to describe that reading is a valuable skill to cultivate.

Reading Signs

Directional signs and prohibitive signs share many similarities across cultures. For this reason it can be interesting to ask students to read American signs as well as to share examples of signs from their own cultures. Typing the purpose of a sign into a search engine may quickly provide you with visual examples of signs, which can be expanded to an exercise comparing the subtle differences between different signs with the same purposes. Are the signs different for cultural reasons? Is one sign more acceptable in a formal/informal setting? How could these signs be misinterpreted? This type of discussion could be conducted in a large or small group and is often most successful when the students are allowed to search for some of their own cultural examples. Also, grammar and writing skills may be exercised by requiring students to write about what the sign is trying to say using the imperative or any other grammatical form.

Reading Color and Symbols

Since most visuals can be interpreted differently through different cultural lenses, a discussion of the meaning of color or symbols can be quite engaging. For example, each culture has certain expectations for the color of dress and decoration during special events or for different governmental offices. In one context, red may mean luck, while in another it represents blood. Flags, logos, emblems, or even heraldry can lend themselves to such a discussion as well. Not only do the colors carry significance, but the images of certain animals, foods, astronomical elements, or products are significant as well. Students can be asked to write about or discuss the significance of certain colors or symbols through a personal, American, or regional lens and by sharing these ideas with their classmates, they can expand their ability to analyze other visuals as critical readers.

Reading Advertisements

Just as with other culturally significant visuals, advertisements – whether still images or video clips – can be read differently by different viewers. Ambiguous or ironic advertisements are particularly valuable in the ESL classroom. Also, if advertisements include text or dialogue, that can be disguised until the students have had a chance to discuss the meaning on their own. If the students have access to smart phones or other video recording devices, they can be charged with the task of creating their own video advertisements.

Reading Artworks

It is no secret that artworks can be used to prompt discussion or writing tasks that are comparative or descriptive in style. They can also be viewed through the lens of a specific subject of interest to the student, such as politics, sociology, history, or cultural pluralism. The first time a piece of art is introduced into an ESL classroom however, it is best to be very specific about what questions or subjects you want the students to explore. Asking students to create a brochure or newsletter featuring examples and descriptions of artworks of a specific mode or style is one way to put their analysis into a digitized visual project of their own creation. Mixing literacies is an inevitable and practical outcome when the focus is on CBI.

Historical Literacy

Without a context or an element of self-identity, history can occasionally be a bore to some and it will not spark engaged English practice. However, when broken down into personal, familial, regional, and national segments, history can provide a rich context for students in an ESL classroom. Students already know their own history and so that is a logical place to start.

Personal History Timeline

After seeing an example timeline pulled from another source or representative of the instructors personal history highlights, students can create their own personal history timeline. This can be focused on just one aspect of the student's personal history – particularly if the student has a distraught personal history – or it can encompass any and all aspects of the student's significant life events such as learning to ride a bike or entering into different academic stages. After focusing on the self, students can follow-up this task with the creation of a family tree using printouts or websites with genealogical templates. The personal history timeline can be expanded to include familial and regional histories as well. Most students will find this to be the most enjoyable presentation that they are ever required to do in an ESL classroom. Regional history research can be conducted and included if the classroom comprises of students from different countries or even different hometowns.

Local American History

Rather than taking on such large topics as American or World history in your ESL classroom, it can be beneficial to focus on the local regional history of your school or community. If the city where your school is situated has a local historical society or if the school has an alumni association, these are perfect resources for field trips or classroom visits. Keep in mind though that other faculty or community members may have very relevant knowledge of the local history and their own collection of stories and photographs to share. Timelines, comparative history notes, or focused reports about significant historical events are all historical tasks that require students to analyze facts and events across cultures.

Civic Literacy

Civic literacy includes the ability to understand and contribute to group endeavors such as volunteerism, citizenship, mindful economies, politics, and collaboration. Field trips and guest speakers are just two ways of increasing the Civic IQ of an ESL classroom. As with many other types of literacies, a meaningful way to teach civic literacy is through raising awareness about services, groups, and practices that might be similar to those that the students are already familiar with in their home countries. Students may create a comparative analysis of the rules, benefits, and requirements of organizations in the U.S. with similar organizations from back home.

Volunteer organization comparisons

While volunteerism is just one aspect of civic literacy, it is a very accessible one for a comparative analysis. Depending upon the level of the student, a classroom discussion around one type of volunteer organization can ensue or students can conduct an in-depth comparison of two similar organizations. Rather than simply reporting on the differences, students can create a

newsletter that compares the highlights of these organizations. For example, a student may choose to focus on environmentalism, elderly care, healthcare, education, or another specific type of organization. Students can feature in their newsletters: the mission statements, locations, steps to becoming a volunteer, benefits for the volunteer, and histories of the two organizations.

Nutritional Literacy

Nutrition is another one of those topics that varies from culture to culture, but is likely already well-known to the students. When learning new vocabulary and tasks to share their cultural perspectives on food, very few will shy away from this discussion. You must pre-teach vocabulary for food groups, recipe requirements, nutritional values, and nutrients. The best part about this theme is that the students and instructor already have several content-rich materials for the classroom: food labels.

Food labels

Food labels are a good place to start and from there, students can compare the nutrients and ingredients in certain foods with those in their favorite recipes. Students can also discuss prices of goods, search for nutritional values of their favorite recipes online, or even discuss what constitutes a balanced diet in their culture.

Grocery shopping

If resources and time are available, you can arrange a field trip to a local grocery store, community garden, farmer's market, or coop to raise awareness of the variety of prices and the quality of goods that are available to the American shopper. Students may also be interested in creating a how-to demonstration of their favorite recipe, arranging a cultural potluck, or creating a classroom cookbook.

Conclusion

Teacher and program elasticity is essential for the ESL classroom using multiple literacy themes; however, if it is not possible to create the curriculum around this concept, it is possible to integrate multiple literacy tasks into a skill-focused classroom. A writing assignment can incorporate academic and visual literacies or an academic speech can include graphic organizers, historical data, and a peer directed activity. If the goal of the ESL program is to teach English skills that are useful in academic, career, and daily settings, the content of the lessons must lend itself to the student's ability to use multiple literacy skills to complete tasks in English.

References

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